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Building from Within: Identity and Inner Capacities in the Positive Development of Malay Youth in Singapore

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Abstract

This study examines the developmental strengths of Malay youth in Singapore through a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, focusing on Identity and Inner Capacities. Using a sequential mixed-methods design, survey data from 615 secondary school students were analysed using exploratory factor analysis, identifying three core factors: self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values. Self-concept recorded the lowest mean (M = 3.26), while relational autonomy (M = 3.61) and prosocial values (M = 3.74) were comparatively strong. Quantitative differences were observed across gender, school level, and household size. Eight focus group discussions with 41 youths provided interpretive depth. Qualitative findings showed that lower self-concept reflected relational and situated understandings rather than a lack of capacity. Autonomy was negotiated within family relationships, while prosocial values were enacted through caregiving, religious practices, and community involvement. Together, the findings highlight that Malay youths' developmental strengths are embedded in relational, cultural, and structural contexts, affirming the relevance of the Self-in-Context model for understanding youth development in Singapore. The study underscores the importance of 'building from within' by recognising and strengthening internal capacities alongside relational supports. Implications are discussed for school-based practices, family-engaged interventions, and community-led programmes.

Keywords

Positive Youth Development (PYD), Malay Youth, Singapore, Self-Concept, Relational Autonomy, Prosocial Values, Self-in-Context Model

1. Introduction

In Singapore's multicultural society, the developmental trajectories of ethnic minority youth have frequently been framed through deficit-oriented narratives. Dominant discourses in research and policy have tended to foreground risk behaviours and dysfunction, including delinquency (Neo et al., 2021; Ting & Chu, 2017), substance use (Osman, 2014), gaming-related concerns (Ferguson, Jeong, & Wang, 2023), bullying (Holt et al., 2016), and mental health challenges (Goh & Koh, 2024). While such concerns warrant attention, an exclusive focus on such issues risks overlooking the internal resources, cultural values, and adaptive capacities that young people draw upon to navigate everyday life. For Malay youth specifically, statistics reflecting adverse outcomes are more meaningfully understood when considered alongside the structural conditions that shape them, as well as the strengths and capabilities that youth develop in navigating these conditions.

Responding to these considerations, this study advances a culturally grounded Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach that centres Malay youth experiences and repositions them not as passive recipients of intervention, but as active agents negotiating complex sociocultural conditions. PYD offers a strengths-based alternative to deficit models by emphasising the dynamic interplay between individual capacities and contextual supports in shaping youth development and thriving (Lerner et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2022). This perspective is especially salient in Singapore, where ethnic identity, religious commitments, family obligations, and aspirations for social mobility intersect in young people's everyday lives. Situating PYD within this context allows for a more nuanced understanding of how developmental strengths are expressed, constrained, and cultivated under conditions of social stratification.

Central to this paper is the concept of "building from within", which foregrounds internal developmental capacities as foundational to resilience, motivation, and ethical engagement. Drawing on a broader study that identified seven interrelated developmental constructs, this paper focuses on three constructs grouped under the domain of Identity and Inner Capacities: self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values. Together, these constructs capture the internal strengths youth mobilise as they make sense of who they are, navigate relationships, and orient themselves toward collective responsibilities.

Self-concept refers to how youth perceive and value themselves, encompassing self-worth, purpose, and future orientation. These perceptions are shaped through interactions with family, culture, and broader societal expectations, as well as through youths' navigation of structural pressures and social stereotypes (Crone & Fuligni, 2020; Zhang & Qin, 2023). Relational autonomy describes the capacity to make values-based decisions while remaining embedded within family and community relationships. Rather than signifying independence from others, it reflects autonomy-in-interdependence, shaped by relational expectations and social conditions, and is particularly salient in Malay and Muslim contexts where collec-

tive responsibility and filial obligations are emphasised (Azmi et al., 2023; Bin, 2021). Prosocial values refer to internalised moral orientations toward empathy, responsibility, and mutual aid, which guide voluntary behaviours such as helping and sharing (Baumsteiger, 2019). These values are often cultivated through religious teachings, cultural norms such as *gotong-royong* (communal cooperation), and expectations surrounding kinship and community participation (Azlan & Alavi, 2024).

This inquiry is situated within a Self-in-Context perspective, which conceptualises youth development as an ongoing process shaped through relational, cultural, and institutional environments rather than as an individualised psychological trajectory (Harake, 2021). From this standpoint, identity and inner capacities are not static attributes but are actively constructed through young people's engagements with family, peers, schools, and broader sociopolitical structures. Building identity and inner capacities, therefore, involves more than cultivating individual confidence; it requires social conditions that affirm cultural belonging, enable relational trust, and support meaningful youth participation.

This paper argues that recognising and strengthening these internal dimensions—rather than narrowly focusing on behavioural risks—offers a more culturally affirming and developmentally responsive approach to understanding ethnic minority youth development in Singapore. Theoretically, the study contributes to youth scholarship by illustrating how PYD assets may be expressed through relationally embedded forms of agency and moral orientation, challenging assumptions that individualised self-concept is the primary marker of positive development. Practically, the findings offer direction for educators, youth workers, and policymakers seeking to move beyond standardised, one-size-fits-all interventions toward approaches that are more contextually responsive. Schools are highlighted as one of the key sites where identity, belonging, and internal capacities can be meaningfully nurtured.

2. Literature Review

This review draws on four bodies of literature to establish the conceptual foundation for the study. First, it outlines PYD as a strengths-based alternative to deficit-oriented models of adolescence. Second, it situates youth development within Singapore's meritocratic and multicultural context, with particular attention to the framing of Malay youth. Third, it reviews three core constructs—self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values—that anchor the domain of identity and inner capacities. Finally, it introduces the Self-in-Context model as the relational-ecological lens through which these constructs are examined.

2.1. Positive Youth Development: A Strengths-Based Perspective

PYD emerged in the 1990s in response to deficit-based approaches that framed adolescence as a period of risk and instability, often traced to Hall's (1904) notion of "storm and stress" (Shek et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2022). Rather than conceptualis-

ing youth as problems to be managed, PYD foregrounds strengths, capacities, and developmental potential, reshaping youth research and policy globally (Shen et al., 2024).

PYD is grounded in the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) metatheory, which emphasises reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Lerner et al., 2019). This perspective rejects a dichotomy between person and environment, highlighting developmental plasticity and youths' active role in shaping their life trajectories (Lerner et al., 2019; Shek et al., 2019). Positive development is thus defined not by the absence of risk but by the presence of internal capacities and supportive ecologies that enable adaptation, purpose, and contribution.

2.2. Youth Development in the Singapore Context

As a compact, resource-constrained city-state, Singapore places strong emphasis on human capital development as central to national survival and competitiveness. Education—underpinned by the principle of meritocracy—is widely positioned as the primary pathway to social mobility and individual success (Chiong, 2021). Consequently, youth development is closely tied to broader economic and social priorities, with young people understood as critical contributors to the nation's future (Donaldson & Kassim, 2021; Mutalib, 2012).

Research and policy attention to youth development in Singapore has intensified in recent decades, reflecting concerns about resilience, employability, and social cohesion in a rapidly changing society (National Youth Council, 2024: 01 Youth & Their Diverse Priorities, 02 Youth & the Future of Work). Large-scale surveys, such as the National Youth Survey, document how young people navigate academic pressures, career aspirations, and key life transitions (National Youth Council, 2024: 05 Youth & Their Strides towards Flourishing). Academic scholarship similarly highlights both vulnerabilities and resources, pointing to the need for balanced frameworks that recognise structural constraints while acknowledging youths' adaptive capacities (Chung et al., 2025; Ali, 2016; Wong et al., 2024).

Youth from economically and socially less-privileged backgrounds face disproportionate barriers to positive development. Unequal access to opportunities and resources, combined with high performance expectations, can constrain developmental trajectories and compound stress (Tomaszewski et al., 2022). These challenges are often interconnected, such that difficulties in education may cascade into vulnerabilities in employment, wellbeing, and social participation (Arnup et al., 2025).

Within this landscape, research on Malay youth has frequently been shaped by deficit-oriented framings. Studies have emphasised risks such as delinquency, substance use, mental health concerns, and digital addictions (Ang et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2024; Ong et al., 2021), reinforcing a persistent "Malay problem" narrative rooted in colonial stereotypes and structural inequalities (Ali, 2016; Babcock, 2022). Concerns about underachievement and socioeconomic disparity have further entrenched these framings, shaping policy responses in ways that may inad-

vertently undermine identity and belonging (Talib, 2019).

At the same time, such narratives obscure important gains and forms of resilience. Malay youth have experienced absolute improvements in educational attainment and social mobility, supported by community organisations, mosque-based initiatives, and extended family networks that scaffold developmental opportunities (György & Sebestyén, 2013). Recent scholarship increasingly calls for strengths-based approaches that foreground agency, cultural resources, and adaptive capacities within the Malay community (Chung et al., 2025; Suratman, 2004; Aikman et al., 2016). Applying PYD in this context offers a critical counterpoint to deficit discourses, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how ethnic minority youth develop strengths within structurally constrained environments.

2.3. Core Constructs in Context: Self-Concept, Relational Autonomy, and Prosocial Values

PYD highlights the importance of internal assets, alongside external supports, in fostering resilience and thriving during adolescence (Shek et al., 2019). Among these assets, three intrapersonal capacities—self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values—are particularly salient for understanding identity formation, motivation, and social engagement (Chung et al., 2025).

Self-concept shapes how youth understand who they are and who they may become, influencing motivation, decision-making, and adjustment across developmental transitions (Oyserman et al., 2012; Van der Aar et al., 2022). While coherent self-concepts are associated with resilience, fragmented self-concepts have been linked to vulnerability and maladaptive coping (Levey et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2023).

Relational autonomy captures youths' capacity to exercise agency while remaining embedded in close relationships. Conceptualised as autonomy-in-interdependence rather than detachment, it develops through supportive relational contexts and contributes to wellbeing, perspective-taking, and civic engagement (Kagitcibasi, 2013; Larson, 2006).

Prosocial values reflect moral orientations toward empathy, responsibility, and contribution. Rooted in moral reasoning and intrinsic motivations such as purpose and meaning, they sustain cooperative and helping behaviours that reinforce identity, social capital, and wellbeing (Siu et al., 2012; Moran, 2020; Bartolo et al., 2023).

Taken together, these constructs highlight how self-understanding, agency, and contribution intersect in mutually reinforcing ways. Rather than operating independently, self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values form a constellation of internal capacities that anchor positive development in context. They serve as the conceptual foundation for this study's examination of identity and inner capacities among Malay youth.

2.4. The Self-in-Context Model: A Relational-Ecological Lens

The Self-in-Context model conceptualises youth development as a relationally

embedded process shaped by family, peers, schools, and community institutions (Roeser et al., 2006; Osher et al., 2020). Identity and inner capacities are actively constructed through these interactions rather than residing solely within the individual.

For Malay youth in Singapore, developmental ecologies are strongly mediated by family networks, religious institutions, and community norms. Supportive relationships foster self-concept clarity and moral identity, while educational transitions and meritocratic pressures shape how autonomy and belonging are negotiated (Azmi et al., 2023; Chung et al., 2025; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). Participation in mosques and faith-based youth groups further reinforces prosocial values and collective identity, anchoring individual development within shared moral frameworks (Azlan & Alavi, 2024).

Viewed through a Self-in-Context lens, self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values are not merely individual traits but relationally and institutionally situated capacities. This perspective underscores the importance of culturally grounded, relationally attuned approaches to PYD among Malay youth in Singapore.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design and Context

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey (Phase One) with qualitative focus group discussions (Phase Two). The design enabled the identification of key developmental assets among Malay youths, followed by deeper exploration of how these assets are experienced and interpreted within Singapore's hybrid sociocultural environment. Such an approach responds to calls for more culturally grounded and context-sensitive understandings of youth developmental trajectories.

Participants were secondary school students aged 13 to 17 years who attended the MENDAKI Tuition Programme (MTP; now known as the MENDAKI Achievement Programme [MAP])[1], a community-based tuition programme supported by a non-profit organisation in Singapore. The programme primarily serves Malay youths and provides both academic support and developmental enrichment. As such, the study is situated within a community-based educational ecosystem that is particularly relevant to understanding youth development beyond formal schooling contexts.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the university ethics research board prior to data collection for both phases of the study. Given that participants were minors, written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians during recruitment, and youth assent was obtained on the day

[1]https://www.mendaki.org.sg/programmes/parent/mendaki-achievement-programme-MCHPA-KOP2KRNG7VFCYPQFUY6VILI

of data collection. To ensure anonymity and minimise potential power dynamics, the community partner, Yayasan MENDAKI—not the research team—liaised with parents and students at all stages of the study. During the focus group discussions, the partner organisation assigned each participant a unique anonymised alphabetic code.

All participants were provided with participation information prior to data collection and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

3.3. Phase One: Quantitative Component

The study employed a census-based recruitment strategy targeting all secondary school students across all MENDAKI Tuition Programme (MTP) sites in Singapore. Participation was inclusive of all academic levels (Secondary 1 to 5) but was operationally constrained by the requirement for parental consent and youth assent. In Phase one, a total of 986 youths were enrolled in the study, of whom 848 completed the survey questionnaire. A data-cleaning protocol was applied to the 848 completions to ensure the integrity of the subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). This involved the removal of duplicated responses (ensuring each participant was represented only once) and the exclusion of incomplete entries where core developmental scales were unfinished. This resulted in a final analytic sample of 615 valid responses.

Among the final analytic sample (see Table 1), 59.2% were male and 40.8% were female. Participants were distributed across academic levels, with 26.8% in Secondary 1, 28.6% in Secondary 2, 22.9% in Secondary 3, and 21.6% in Secondary 4 or 5. Household size distribution was as follows: 25.7% from households with 2 - 4 members, 51.4% from households with 5 - 6 members, and 22.6% from households with more than 6 members.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants (n = 615)[2].

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	364	59.2%
	Female	251	40.8%
Academic Level	Secondary 1	165	26.8%
	Secondary 2	176	28.6%
	Secondary 3	141	22.9%
	Secondary 4 - 5	133	21.6%
Household Size	2 - 4 members	158	25.7%
	5 - 6 members	316	51.4%
	More than 6 members	139	22.6%
	Missing	2	0.3%

[2]The survey collected data from a total of 615 youth participants aged 13 to 17 for analysis.

3.4. Phase Two: Qualitative Component

In Phase two, eight semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a total of 41 participants. (n = 19 male, n = 21 female) Participants were recruited using maximum variation purposive sampling to ensure broad representation across Singapore's five geographic zones, gender and school levels. (Lower secondary: n = 21; Upper secondary: n = 20). While participation was constrained by voluntary consent, this stratified approach was to ensure that qualitative insights captured a diverse range of perspectives. The FGDs explored youths' experiences of family relationships, peer dynamics, aspirations, and self-concept, allowing for deeper contextualisation of the quantitative findings.

Each FGD lasted approximately 45 - 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and all personally identifiable information was removed during transcription. Transcripts were reviewed by the Primary Investigator for accuracy before being uploaded into NVivo 15 for qualitative analysis.

4. Analysis

4.1. Quantitative: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

To derive a contextualised PYD framework relevant to Malay youths in Singapore, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on Phase One survey data. Survey items were adapted from established PYD instruments, including the 5/6Cs model and the 40 Developmental Assets framework (Chung et al., 2025; Arnold et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2022; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2024). Items were systematically drawn from the literature and mapped to their original conceptual domains, ensuring theoretical grounding while allowing empirical reconfiguration based on local data.

EFA was performed on 34 items using SPSS (Version 29). Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) was selected to identify latent constructs based on shared variance. Given the theoretical expectation that developmental assets are interrelated, Promax rotation with Kaiser normalisation was applied. Sampling adequacy was excellent (KMO = 0.958), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 12,397, df = 561, $p < 0.001$), confirming suitability for factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) retained factors based on multiple criteria, including eigenvalues greater than 1.0, scree plot interpretation, and conceptual interpretability of the factor structure. Items with low factor loadings (below 0.32) or substantial cross-loadings across factors were removed to improve clarity and construct coherence. The final solution retained seven factors that demonstrated acceptable statistical strength and theoretical alignment with the proposed youth development domains. Through this iterative refinement, three items were removed, resulting in a final 31-item solution.

Factor Structure and Reliability

The final EFA yielded a seven-factor solution within three domains (See **Figure 1**).

This paper focuses on the *Identity and Inner Capacities* domain with three empirically distinct yet correlated factors:

- *Prosocial Values* (4 items; α = .858; M = 3.74, SD = 0.82), reflecting moral responsibility, empathy, and concern for others.

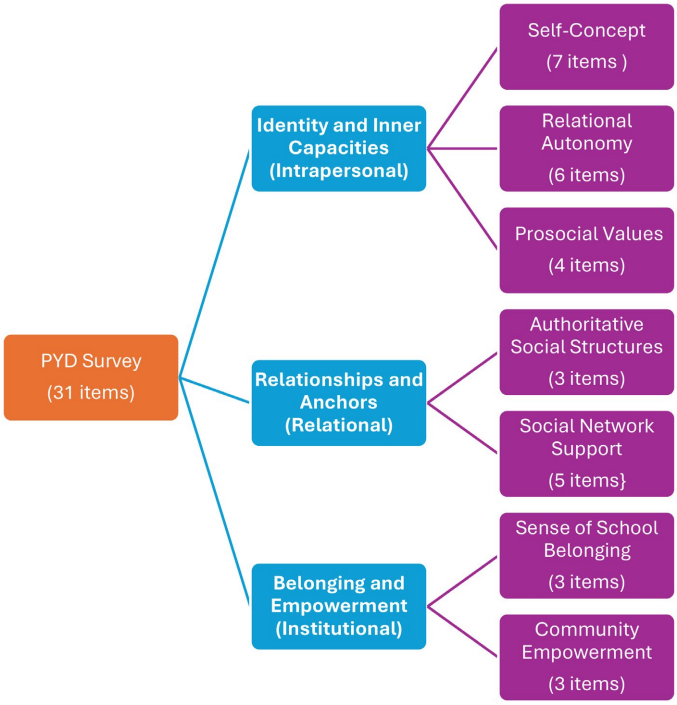

Figure 1. EFA seven-factor structure grouped into three domains.

- *Self-Concept* (7 items; α = .870; M = 3.26, SD = 0.77), capturing self-worth, confidence, and positive self-appraisal.
- *Relational Autonomy* (6 items; α = .821; M = 3.61, SD = 0.73), representing the capacity for self-determined action within significant relationships.

All three factors had strong internal consistency, supporting their conceptual coherence (see Table 2).

Table 2. Three factors in identity and inner capacities domain[3].

Factor	No of Items in Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation
Prosocial Values	4	0.858	3.739	0.821
Self-Concept	7	0.870	3.259	0.770
Relational Autonomy	6	0.821	3.610	0.733

Comparative Quantitative Analysis

Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed significant differences across the three fac-

[3]A Tukey HSD test (see Table 3) was conducted to examine differences in mean scores across these three factors.

tors (see Table 3). *Prosocial Values* recorded the highest mean scores, followed by *Relational Autonomy*, with *Self-Concept* the lowest. This pattern suggests that while youths demonstrate strong moral orientations and relationally embedded agency, personal confidence and self-worth are comparatively less consolidated. To facilitate group comparisons, composite scores for Self-Concept, Relational Autonomy, and Prosocial Values were computed by averaging the items loading onto each factor identified in the EFA. Higher scores reflected stronger endorsement of the respective construct. These mean scores were subsequently compared across gender, school level, and household size using independent t-test, with statistical significance assessed using p-values and effect sizes reported to determine the magnitude of group differences.

An independent-samples t-test revealed significant gender differences across two core dimensions of self-concept. Specifically, males (M = 3.34, SD = 0.74) reported significantly higher levels of general self-concept than females (M = 3.14, SD = 0.80), t (615) = 3.29, p = 0.001, Cohen's d = 0.27. Similarly, a significant gender difference emerged for relational autonomy, t (615) = 2.28, p = 0.023, Cohen's d = 0.19, with males again scoring higher than females. Furthermore, significant differences based on school level were observed for both prosocial value, t (615) = −3.01, p = 0.003, Cohen's d = −0.25, and relational autonomy, t (615) = −2.95, p = 0.003, Cohen's d = −0.24. Finally, household size significantly influenced relational autonomy scores, with smaller households demonstrating significantly higher scores than larger households, t (615) = 2.79, p = 0.005, Cohen's d = 0.27.

Table 3. Tukey HSD test across factors in identity and inner capacities domain.

	Factor	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
			1	2	3
Tukey HSD[a]	Self-Concept	615	3.25900		
	Relational Autonomy	615		3.61030	
	Prosocial Values	615			3.73902
	Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Across demographic subgroups (see Table 4), males scored higher than females on all three factors. Upper secondary students reported higher scores than lower secondary students, indicating developmental gains associated with age and schooling. Youths from smaller households (≤six members) also reported higher scores, suggesting that family structure may shape access to emotional and relational support relevant to identity development.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis: Elaboration of Identity and Inner Capacities

Phase Two qualitative data were analysed using a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis approach. This involves the use of both a priori and emerging

Table 4. Comparison of factors by demographics[4].

	Self-Concept	Relational Autonomy	Prosocial Values
Gender			
Female	3.137	3.529	3.740
Male	3.343	3.667	3.738
School Level			
Lower Secondary	3.245	3.532	3.650
Upper Secondary	3.276	3.708	3.850
Household Size			
2 - 6 members	3.287	3.653	3.764
More than 6 members	3.162	3.459	3.662

codes, an approach appropriate when a pre-existing theory or framework guides the initial interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure interpretive consistency, two researchers collaboratively developed the codebook, reaching consensus on the definitions of the deductive coding framework anchored to the three EFA-derived factors—self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values. Subsequently, through iterative engagement with the transcripts, emergent sub-themes were identified. The Principal Investigator cross-checked these inductive codes against the transcripts to corroborate the Research Assistant's preliminary findings, ensuring rigorous thematic application that captured how these internal capacities were uniquely experienced and negotiated within the youths' specific contexts, ensuring alignment between quantitative structures and qualitative depth.

Self-Concept. Youths framed self-worth primarily in relational terms, linking confidence to responsibility, usefulness, and fulfilment of family roles rather than academic 'smartness' or internal affirmation alone. For example, participant A3 said:

> "So, it's like… what is the point of being smart if you are not contributing back to the society? So that is what I was brought up with... if you, like, you're not smart but you… you can keep your responsibilities, do your responsibilities, that's really considered… you're very smart, in terms of being a human."

This helps explain why self-concept scores in the quantitative studies lagged behind prosocial values despite high engagement. Gendered quantitative patterns were reflected qualitatively, indicating that higher male scores reflect broader and more holistic understandings of competence—extending beyond academic performance—rather than greater confidence per se. Female participants more frequently anchored their self-worth to academic excellence and specific subject

[4]An analysis was conducted to evaluate the three factors across various demographic subgroups. The findings demonstrate consistent patterns among gender, school level, and household size.

mastery, though exceptions regarding moral and social competence existed across both groups.

Relational Autonomy. Autonomy was described as negotiated and earned through trust, responsibility, and dialogue with parents, rather than enacted through separation. Youths valued parental authority for structure and guidance, while often seeking peers or other adults for emotional support, illuminating patterns observed across both datasets. For example, A7 said:

> "I mean, being a teenager… sometimes… I would feel that these rules don't make sense. But… if I look at it from a bigger picture, I can see why my mom made these rules in the first place… because many kids my age do a lot of - mind my language - relatively kind of like, stupid things, because... because they act on impulse. So, I see... I see the reasoning behind my mom's actions."

Older youths reported greater decision-making latitude, aligning with age-related quantitative differences and suggesting that autonomy consolidates through opportunity and relational support.

Prosocial Values. Strong prosocial orientations identified in the EFA were reinforced by qualitative accounts of values transmission through family practices, religious teachings, and everyday responsibilities. Values were enacted as lived commitments and sustained through relational affirmation, contributing to their stability across demographic groups. For example, C3 states that while her parents do not impose high academic expectations, they expect high standards of behaviour and conduct:

> "But like, in terms of like, behaviour, they are…strict on that. Like… we should always… have manners. For example, whenever we have guests over, we are never allowed to stay in our rooms... [we have] to always greet others."

With regard to her social life, she states that her parents allow her to go out with friends "*as long as… I take care of my…Deen…I make sure that I complete my prayers*". Here, the reference to "Deen" which describes the Islamic way of life that anchors the individual within shared moral and social frameworks, shows the importance of religious values and how they are enacted through everyday responsibilities and family expectations.

5. Findings: Identity and Inner Capacities

This section presents integrated quantitative and qualitative findings on the *Identity and Inner Capacities* domain of PYD, comprising *Self-Concept, Relational Autonomy, and Prosocial Values.* Quantitative analyses identify patterned variations across demographic groups, while qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) provide contextual interpretation of how these patterns are experienced and understood by youths.

5.1. Identity and Self-Confidence Vary across Groups

Quantitative analyses revealed significant variation across self-concept, rela-

tional autonomy, and prosocial values by demographic group. Male youths scored higher than females across all three factors, particularly on measures related to confidence and autonomy.

Qualitative findings nuance this pattern. FGDs indicate that higher male scores reflect broader and more holistic understandings of competence, extending beyond academic performance to include practical skills, peer leadership, and family responsibilities. Female participants, by contrast, more often anchored self-evaluations to academic outcomes and external validation. Nevertheless, their responses did not preclude a multidimensional understanding of self-worth. Indeed, several female participants articulated sophisticated definitions of competence rooted in moral contribution, resilience, and social intelligence.

5.2. Developmental Confidence Strengthens with Age and Opportunity

Upper secondary students reported higher levels of self-concept and relational autonomy indicating developmental gains associated with age and schooling progression.

Qualitative findings reinforce this pattern. While prosocial orientations such as empathy and responsibility were evident across age groups, older youths demonstrated greater agency and independent decision-making when provided with meaningful opportunities. This suggests that confidence and autonomy consolidate not through age alone, but through contextual affordances that enable the practice of responsibility and choice.

5.3. Family Structure Shapes Emotional and Relational Support

Youths from smaller households (six members or fewer) reported stronger self-concept and relational autonomy than those from larger households, highlighting the role of family structure in shaping developmental resources.

Qualitative findings indicate that youths from smaller households benefit from clearer emotional anchoring through specific parents or trusted adults. In larger households, support is more diffused and often accompanied by caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings, which can build maturity and responsibility but reduce access to individualised emotional support, shaping how confidence and autonomy develop.

5.4. Relational Anchors Are Central but Differentiated

Across both datasets, relational anchors emerged as central to identity development. Quantitative findings show strong endorsement of relational autonomy and prosocial values, underscoring the importance of relationships in shaping internal capacities.

Qualitative data clarify that support is differentiated across relational contexts. Youths valued parental authority for structure, boundaries, and guidance, often framed through cultural values such as *taat* (respectful obedience) and *gotong-*

royong (mutual support). At the same time, emotional validation was frequently sought from peers, mentors, or other trusted adults.

5.5. Prosocial Values and Readiness for Contribution

Prosocial values recorded the highest mean scores within the Identity and Inner Capacities domain. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate strong orientations toward helping others, contributing to family and community life, and acting responsibly.

Qualitative accounts show these values enacted through everyday practices such as caregiving for siblings, supporting peers, and participating in community or religious activities. Together, these patterns point to developmental readiness for contribution.

6. Discussion

This study examined Identity and Inner Capacities among Malay youths in Singapore through an integrated mixed-methods approach. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, the findings move beyond descriptive comparisons to show how these internal capacities are *enabled* and/or *constrained*.

Self-Concept

Among the three factors, self-concept recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.259$, $\alpha = 0.870$), indicating a relative vulnerability in how youths perceive their own confidence, worth, and sense of personal efficacy. Quantitatively, self-concept varied by gender, school level, and household size, with higher scores among males, older youths, and those from smaller households. Qualitative findings complicate a deficit interpretation of these results. Indeed, they suggest that the gender gap in self-concept is a result of different coping strategies—while female participants proved they understand that 'being smart' has dimensions beyond school performance, they feel the weight of academic pressure more acutely than males. Male participants seem to be able to mitigate the impact of academic underperformance by employing broad definitions of intelligence that encompass practical life skills. These findings suggest that gender differences in self-concept scores reflect differences in how confidence is defined and expressed, rather than straightforward disparities in internal strength. Rather than reflecting a lack of ability or aspiration, youths' narratives suggest that self-worth is often constructed relationally—through usefulness, responsibility, and contribution to family—rather than through internal affirmation or individual achievement.

In a meritocratic and performance-driven system such as Singapore's, recognition is often narrowly tied to academic and institutional benchmarks. For Malay youths, whose competencies frequently extend beyond these metrics, confidence may be undermined not by incapacity but by limited symbolic and structural recognition. Gendered patterns further reflect differences in how competence is defined: male youths described broader, practice-based understandings of capability.

The findings carry important developmental implications. A weakened self-concept can undermine motivation, academic persistence, and mental well-being, even when other areas of development are strong. Building from within, in this context, requires more than promoting confidence; it calls for affirming identity, countering deficit narratives, and providing opportunities for self-expression in culturally congruent and psychologically safe spaces—particularly in schools, families, and community programmes.

Relational Autonomy

In contrast, relational autonomy recorded a higher mean score ($M = 3.610$, $\alpha = 0.821$), highlighting the relatively strong capacity of Malay youth to navigate decision-making and self-direction in their social worlds. Qualitative data clarify that autonomy is not enacted through separation, but through negotiation, trust, and responsibility. Unlike Western models of autonomy that prioritize individual independence, relational autonomy reflects a more contextually grounded understanding. The individual self, at varying degrees, engages in self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization in negotiation with others—parents, family, teachers, and peers. This differentiation helps explain how strong relational autonomy coexists with reliance on multiple support sources. It does not signal passivity but rather a culturally balance of obligation, respect, and choice.

Here, too, demographic variations shed light on important dynamics. Males, upper secondary students, and those from smaller households reported higher levels of relational autonomy. Older students may naturally experience more autonomy as they progress through adolescence and negotiate greater independence with parents and schools. However, relational autonomy may also be easier to exercise in smaller households, where youth have fewer competing voices and more space to develop their decision-making capacities.

Prosocial Values

The highest score was observed for prosocial values ($M = 3.739$, $\alpha = 0.868$), highlighting a strong internalisation of moral responsibility, empathy, and concern for others among Malay youth. This finding underscores the significant role of relational socialisation—through family and community structures. Prosocial, in this context, is not merely a behavioural outcome but a core orientation, reflecting a commitment to values such as mutual care, community well-being, and social justice. These values are often cultivated through religious teachings, family practices of mutual respect, and community expectations of reciprocity and service.

6.1. Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from this study underscore that Identity and Inner Capacities are shaped through ongoing interactions between youths and their relational, institutional, and cultural environments. Differences by gender, age, and household structure highlight the need for developmentally sequenced and context-sensitive approaches to youth policy and practice.

Although male youths reported higher mean scores across self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values, qualitative findings indicate that this reflects differences in dominant frames of reference for evaluating competence rather than fixed disparities in internal strength. Schools and youth organisations can therefore broaden the definitions of success and competence by recognising diverse forms of capability—such as peer leadership, problem-solving, and community contribution. Purposeful efforts to create visible leadership and to affirm their voices in classroom and family decision-making, may be particularly important for strengthening self-concept and relational autonomy.

Age-related differences suggest that confidence and autonomy consolidate through opportunity as much as maturation. This points to the value of early and sustained scaffolding. Lower secondary students can be engaged in guided, collaborative activities that emphasise shared responsibility, while upper secondary youths can be given greater ownership through peer mentoring, service-learning, and youth-led initiatives. Such tiered programming supports a gradual expansion of agency while maintaining relational support.

Household structure also shapes developmental experiences. Youths from smaller households appeared to benefit from clearer emotional anchoring, while those from larger households often navigate more diffused support alongside caregiving responsibilities. Family-based interventions should therefore attend not only to cultural norms but also to structural realities. Parenting programmes and community supports can help caregivers in larger families provide individualised affirmation and recognise each child's distinct contributions. Community organisations are well placed to offer mentoring circles, small-group programmes, and safe spaces where youths can experience visibility, guidance, and encouragement.

At the policy level, these findings support a shift from deficit-oriented framings toward recognising and strengthening existing relational and moral assets among Malay youths. This can be advanced by:

- **Embedding service-learning and civic engagement** into formal and non-formal education settings, with opportunities that are community-based.
- **Supporting intergenerational programmes** that leverage the authority of elders and leaders to mentor youth in community stewardship.
- **Recognizing and funding community programmes** that already serve as strong ecosystems with ground-up youth initiatives—to develop youth-led social action.
- **Positioning prosocial values as a developmental outcome** in youth frameworks, alongside academic and career readiness, thereby legitimizing character and contribution as key policy goals.

Practitioners—youth workers, educators, and social service providers—can extend this further by:

- Designing **strengths-based programmes** that treat youth as agents capable of meaningful contribution, not just recipients of guidance.

- Creating **platforms for peer mentoring and cooperative action**, where youth lead projects that address social issues affecting their communities.
- Facilitating **narrative and reflection spaces** where youth connect their personal values to community goals, thereby deepening their sense of purpose.

Taken together, these findings reinforce that the *Identity and Inner Capacities* domain is not only an intrapersonal phenomenon, but a relational and structural one. Supporting youths' PYD requires policies and practices that affirm identity, scaffold autonomy, and channel prosocial values into meaningful contributions—tailored to the nuanced realities of gender, age, and family structure. Investing in youth as contributors and future leaders provides a pathway to social inclusion in multicultural Singapore, where identity, culture, and contribution must be developed in tandem.

Within this broader policy landscape, community-based educational provision represents an important site through which these developmental aims may be operationalised. MENDAKI provides one such institutional context. The present findings suggest that programmes serving Malay youth are likely to be most effective when they move beyond a narrow focus on academic remediation and incorporate opportunities for identity affirmation, guided decision-making, mentoring, enrichment, and meaningful engagement. From this perspective, the transition from the MENDAKI Tuition Programme (MTP), which was the programme in place during the period of this study, to the MENDAKI Achievement Programme (MAP) is analytically significant. The broadening of the programme's scope to include academic support, enrichment, and student engagement reflects a more holistic developmental model that is consistent with the implications of the present findings.

The findings also underscore the importance of relational supports within such a programme ecology. Given that self-concept emerged as the least consolidated of the three internal capacities, with relational autonomy and prosocial values comparatively stronger, structured mentoring may play an important role in helping youths translate existing relational and moral strengths into stronger confidence, aspiration, and educational agency. In this regard, initiatives such as #amPowered mentoring may be understood as platforms through which these capacities are further scaffolded over time.

Taken together, these observations suggest that policy and practice for Malay youth are likely to be most effective when tuition, mentoring, enrichment, and opportunities for engagement and contribution are designed as mutually reinforcing elements of a broader developmental ecosystem.

6.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

These findings reinforce that the *Identity and Inner Capacities* domain is not only an intrapersonal reality but a relational and structural one. However, these patterns are based on cross-sectional data and limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Further research is needed to examine whether

these differences persist over time, how they are shaped by changing relational ecologies, and whether similar trends emerge in other segments of the Malay youth population or across ethnic groups.

Several limitations warrant consideration. The sample comprised Malay youths enrolled in MTP during the period of data collection. The findings should therefore be interpreted in relation to youths already situated within a structured community-based support ecosystem, rather than as representative of the wider Malay youth population, and other ethnic groups. Participation in such programmes may be shaped by family motivation, help-seeking behaviour, educational aspiration, and access to community resources, all of which may influence developmental outcomes independently of the factors examined here.

Second, the programme context itself may have shaped youths' experiences of self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values. Although the programme was primarily academic in orientation at the time of the study, MTP has also included broader developmental elements, making it difficult to fully disentangle programme-related influences from those arising from family, school, or community contexts. Third, the cross-sectional, self-report design also constrains causal inference and does not capture developmental change. As an exploratory study, the EFA-derived structure requires further validation with diverse samples.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values evolve and shape longer-term outcomes such as educational attainment, civic engagement, and well-being. Comparative studies across ethnic and regional contexts would clarify the cultural specificity of these patterns. Methodologically, participatory approaches that engage youths as co-constructors of knowledge can further strengthen theoretical refinement and policy relevance.

7. Conclusion

This paper has sought to reframe Malay youth development in Singapore through the lens of PYD, with a particular emphasis on the domain of Identity and Inner Capacities. In contrast to prevailing deficit-based narratives that emphasize risk and dysfunction, this study highlights how Malay youth draw upon internal strengths—namely, self-concept, relational autonomy, and prosocial values—to navigate the complexities of their cultural, relational, and institutional environments.

The findings underscore that youth are not passively shaped by their circumstances but are active meaning-makers. Their sense of identity is shaped through both affirmation and constraint; their autonomy is relationally negotiated rather than individually asserted; and their commitment to others emerges from deeply rooted cultural and religious values. Together, these capacities form the foundation for youth resilience, agency, and contribution.

By drawing on the Self-in-Context model, the study situates these internal processes within the broader relational and sociocultural contexts that shape youth development. It affirms that cultivating inner capacities is not the sole responsi-

bility of the individual, but requires environments that are psychologically safe, culturally affirming, and responsive to the lived realities of youth.

Theoretically, this work contributes to a more ecologically valid understanding of youth development that accounts for cultural identity. Practically, it provides direction for educators, youth workers, and policymakers to move beyond standardised, one-size-fits-all models and toward approaches that are contextually grounded, relationally sensitive, and strength-based. Ultimately, *building from within* is not simply an individual journey—it is a collective endeavour. When youth are seen, heard, and supported in the fullness of their identity, they not only thrive but also become catalysts of well-being in their communities.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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